

PHIL-UA 93, Fall 2015

PHIL APPS OF COG SCI PAPER TOPICS

Due Dates October 5th, October 26th, November 16th, December 7th, December 21st, at 9.30 AM.

Submit papers by way of NYU Classes. Use one of the following file types: Word, PDF, HTML, RTF, or plain text; please include the appropriate file extension.

Late papers will be penalized one grade increment (e.g., from an A- to a B+, or from a B to a B-), for every day or part thereof that they are late.

Length Either 1800 to 2000 words or (for expanded versions) 3500 to 4000 words. Long papers should be cleared with me and should come with a paragraph describing the enhancements made in the long version.

Formatting Please follow these guidelines for readability. Left and right margins should be at least 1.5 inches wide. Use one-and-a-half spacing, and an easily legible font size (Times at 12 pt or Palatino at 11 pt are about right). Bonus motivation: studies show that more readable texts are more convincing. A relevant (or at least entertaining) link: <http://theweek.com/articles/463196/how-typeface-influences-way-read-think>.

Plagiarism All work submitted for this class should be your own. Any words quoted from other sources should be attributed explicitly to those sources. If you are unsure whether your use of someone else's work is legitimate, please ask me. The penalties for plagiarism include failing the class and worse.

Topics Answer one of the following questions. Don't go past the due date for the paper. But earlier topics remain on the table: for example, for the fifth paper you can answer any of these questions at all.

1. Is magenta a real color? What kinds of considerations, if any, would decide the question? Start with this internet classic: <http://www.biotele.com/magenta.html>. But don't stop there; use some of the ideas we discussed in class.
2. On Locke's theory of concepts, what would it take to acquire the concept 'just war'? Can it be done?

3. Can you tweak either Locke's theory or a prototype theory of concepts (choose one) to fit the data produced by Keil's "transformation" studies?
4. What's wrong with the pure essentialist theory of concepts (as defined by Strevens, "The Essentialist Aspect of Naive Theories" §2 and §5.3), if anything?

Stop here for Oct 5th paper <

5. Briefly describe Leslie's explanation of causal illusions. (Use the launching experiment as your example.) What, according to Kant, creates the impression of causality? Can Kant allow for causal illusions, that is, the impression of a causal connection when none objectively exists (i.e., where we would agree that there is no causal connection in the phenomenal world)? Even if you think that Kant can't explain causal illusions, try as hard as you can to construct an explanation on Kant's behalf. Don't just say it can't be done.
6. To what extent does Leslie's research on causation prove Hume wrong? Is there any prospect of rescuing Hume's views on causation so that they fit with Leslie's results?
7. How is our naive physics mistaken (according to Clement and others)? How do we get by in life if we make these mistakes? Why don't we get eaten or fall off cliffs much more often than we do?
8. How can children be so good at reasoning causally, if their naive physics is seriously mistaken?

Stop here for Oct 26th paper <

9. Is there some kind of universal basis for certain aspects of the human moral makeup? What evidence is there for and against such a basis? (Be selective; discuss a couple of points thoroughly rather than composing a list.) What is the significance, if any, of your answer for moral philosophy?
10. Explain how evolutionary considerations might help to explain some particular part of human morality (i.e., choose an aspect of morality and sketch an explanation of it). Then discuss: how, if at all, is the explanatory story you have presented relevant to the philosophical study of morality?
11. What is "situationism" in psychology? Is John Doris right to think that it poses a problem for philosophical thinking about virtue?
12. In what way do Wegner and Wheatley think that our conscious experience of willing fails to reflect what is actually going on in our brains? Does their view cast doubt on the doctrine that humans have free will?

13. Can philosophers trust their intuitions about ethical matters? Consider one or two arguments—no more!—that philosophers should not trust their intuitions, and critically assess the arguments' strength.
14. Make up your own question. But you must clear it with me first.

Stop here for Nov 16th paper <

15. What is Quine's view on the nature of our concept of an object? What, for Quine, is the point of having object concepts? How does the empirical work on object perception conducted by Spelke and others bear on Quine's view?
16. As we conceive of the world around us, it is full of physical objects. Describe one cognitive task that our object concepts help us to perform. Could we perform this task in some other way, that is, without object concepts? How, if at all, would we be disadvantaged?
17. Why does Locke give the answer that he does to Molyneux's question? What answer do you think Kant would give, and why? In the light of modern cognitive science, whose understanding of the problem (if either) seems to be the more correct?
18. What, according to Poincaré, is the role of spatial thinking in cognition? How do Poincaré's views on the psychology of space lead him to the conclusion that space is not real? Is he right? (It might be useful to spell out the exact sense in which Poincaré thinks that space is not real.)

Stop here for Dec 7th paper <

19. Does space have the properties we see in it? In particular, do we have reason to think that space is three-dimensional? Is the three-dimensional layout of some spatial representations in the brain relevant to answering this philosophical question? Use some neuroscience in your answer.
20. What is the "handedness" of an object? What apparent differences are there between our perception of handedness and the Tenejapan's perception of handedness? Give one argument for and one argument against the hypothesis that these differences are not merely apparent but real, that is, that Tenejapans perceive handedness differently from us (or fail to perceive it at all). Which of your arguments is better?
21. Explain Jackendoff and Landau's contrast between the "Design of Language" hypothesis and the "Design of Spatial Representation" hypothesis (without forgetting to describe what the hypotheses are competing to explain). How do Lakoff's data support the "Design of Language" hypothesis? How do Jackendoff and Landau's data support the "Design of Spatial Representation" hypothesis? Which hypothesis is correct?

22. We have talked quite a lot about the perception of space, but not very much about the perception of time. (Exception: the optional reading for the class on free will.) A popular topic among modern philosophers of time is whether the sense of a flow of time is real, or is just a cognitive illusion. How might the cognitive science of temporal perception bear on this issue? If you answer this question, you will need to go well beyond anything that we have read in class. Talk to me first! And treat anything you find on the internet with suspicion.
23. Benjamin Lee Whorf suggested that the way we represent the world depends heavily upon the language we speak. In particular, according to Whorf, the way we individuate (divide up) the world into objects and categories of objects, and the way we organize objects in space and time, will be strongly influenced by the way in which our native language performs these "metaphysical" tasks. Evaluate this claim in the light of some results from cognitive science. (Discussing one of objects, space, or time is enough.)